Who Was Bill Orr, W6SAI?

"If I have seen further it is by standing on ye shoulders of Giants." — *Sir Isaac Newton*

The author's well-used copy of Bill Orr's *Radio Handbook*. The book was first published in the 1930s.

Eric P. Nichols, KL7AJ

Legendary Amateur Radio pioneer and prolific author Bill Orr, W6SAI, needs no introduction to most hams of the baby-boom generation. For the countless new hams who may not have heard of this "giant" of ham radio, I'd like to provide a tribute to this Elmer's Elmer.

Recently, I was honored and humbled to learn that I had been awarded the Bill Orr, W6SAI, Technical Writing Award. The inscription on the beautiful plaque says, "... honoring writers who possess Bill's gift for using clear language to explain diverse technical subjects of interest to hams."

What an unspeakable compliment — and an awesome responsibility! Fortunately, I didn't have to start from scratch. I had some broad shoulders to stand upon.

Looking through the ARRL archives, I see that Bill wrote 584 articles for *QST* and *Ham Radio* over a period spanning nearly half a century. This is in addition to the numerous books and articles he had written independently. A beloved, battered, coffee-stained and solder-scorched 1972 edition of his *Radio Handbook* has been one of my constant companions for my entire Amateur Radio career.

Looking Up

Bill had a central role to play in the vision and development of the first OSCAR satellite in 1961. The interesting thing is that by this time Bill was already well-qualified as an "Old Man" of ham radio. (Bill was actually a generation older than I; in fact, he was a half-decade older than my parents). While many of his peers were probably ruminating on their rheumatism on 75 meters, Bill was casting longing glances spaceward. I strongly recommend you read the ARRL archives of the years immediately preceding the first OSCAR launch to discover how far Bill stuck his neck out to make it happen.

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Back on Earth

Bill did an awful lot for us earthbound hams, as well. He was very closely associated with Eimac tubes and well known as a "high-power guru" both within the amateur ranks as well as in commercial circles. In fact, I first corresponded with him in the latter role. I was a very green broadcast engineer struggling to get better tube life out of the high power transmitters over which I rode herd. Bill had the right answer, of course (actually several right answers), which made me a hero in the eyes of my station management and for which I was eternally grateful.

Again, referring to the vast number of *QST* and *Ham Radio* articles bearing Bill's name, we see that he touched on every aspect of Amateur Radio: homebrewing, contesting, DXing (including being on several DXpeditions himself), ragchewing, writing, traffic handling and general ham statesmanship.

Bill's writing style clearly demonstrated that you didn't have to be stiff to be accurate. Everything he wrote was eminently readable; his books and articles read more like stories than lessons. I especially appreciated this during my formative ham years, because I was already enduring enough lessons in college at the time.

Although, for most of my career, Bill and I have practically been in different universes, (Bill being in the middle of Silicon Valley where everything happens and I being outside of North Pole, Alaska, where nothing happens), I have always felt at home with Bill's writings. This is the wonderful thing about the written word and ham radio: they both transcend distance and lifestyle.

Not So Silent Key

Bill Orr's forward thinking didn't end with his passing more than a decade ago. The ARRL's setting up the coveted Technical Writing Award to, in perpetuity, encourage and promote excellence in Amateur Radio literature was consistent with the way he did things. Of course, there will never be another Bill Orr, but there will be many who will desire to follow in his footsteps. My "15 minutes of fame" afforded by this award will soon pass, naturally enough, but it is only fitting and right that I honor this Silent Key who has meant so much throughout my entire ham career and a significant part of my professional life.

I wish to thank the ARRL for honoring Bill Orr in this manner, as well. My prayer is that I will continue to deserve the honor of being associated with this great Elmer.

There is more about Bill Orr, W6SAI, on the QST-in-Depth website, **www.arrl.org/qst-in-depth**, and in the Digital Edition.

Eric Nichols, KL7AJ, an ARRL member, obtained his Novice license, WN6TEE, in Manhattan Beach, California in 1972. His first station was a Johnson Adventurer and a pair of brand new surplus ARC-5 receivers (one for 80 meters and one for 40) for which he paid a grand total of $20. Eric eventually moved to North Pole, Alaska, to become chief engineer of KJNP Radio. He spent the next 17 years crawling around inside transmitters. He now works at Eielson Air Force Base. Eric is a fanatic homebrewer and CW freak. He enjoys all aspects of low band operation and fiddles around with some 1750 meter operation as well as PSK31. He can be reached at PO Box 56235, North Pole, AK 99705-1235, **kl7aj@arrl.net**.

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More about Bill Orr, W6SAI

- First licensed in 1934 as W2HCE.
- Worked in Douglas Aircraft's Radio Test Department during WWII.
- First *QST* article was "Triple Conversion for the Communications Receiver" in the September 1948 issue.
- Worked for vacuum tube manufacturer Eitel-McCullogh (Eimac) for 28 years.
- Other books: *Beam Antenna Handbook*, *All About Cubical Quads* and *The W6SAI HF Antenna Handbook.*
- Columnist for both *CQ* and *Ham Radio* magazines.
- Part of the first-ever 1296 MHz Earth-Moon-Earth contact between W6HB (the Eimac Radio Club) and W1FZJ (the Rhododendron Swamp Radio Society) in 1960.
- Died at age 81 in January 2001.